

SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS ON THE THESIS OF "EUSAPIA'S SAPIENT FOOT"

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critique of Polidoro and Rinaldi's (1998) paper, where they posit that Eusapia constantly fooled the authors of the Feilding Report with the use of her legs and feet. The main objective is to examine in detail their arguments and data. It is concluded that Polidoro and Rinaldi's data are mostly anecdotal and that their characterization of Feilding, Baggally and Carrington is highly misleading. The thesis of the wondrous "sapien foot" is unsupported and unconvincing as an explanation of the Feilding Report.

The Feilding Report (Feilding, Baggally & Carrington, 1909/1963) is surely one of the most detailed and thought-provoking documents in the history of psychical research. As such, from the very moment of its appearance, sceptics have tried to explain away the innumerable and striking phenomena recorded in minute detail in the report (see, for example, Hansel, 1980; Houdini, 1924; Kurtz, 1985; Podmore, 1910; Rawcliffe, 1959; Wiseman, 1992).

The most recent attempt to 'explain' away sceptically, and once and for all, the phenomena recorded in the Feilding Report is an article by Polidoro and Rinaldi (P & R) (1998). In this paper I will try to demonstrate two main points: (1) that P & R's article basically contains nothing new, except an extraordinary arrogance on their part; (2) that P & R's main points and data are greatly overstated, to the point of being unconvincing. I will discuss the two points in turn.

POLIDORO AND RINALDI'S POSITION PAPER CONTAINS NEARLY NOTHING NEW

P & R's main point is that Eusapia freed her left foot and her hands to produce all 470 physical phenomena described in the Feilding Report. But, if one reads prior criticisms of Eusapia, one can easily find that nearly all the critics have repeatedly postulated that she produced her phenomena by freeing her feet and hands. Let's quote some of them:—

Eusapia did not require any complicated apparatus—a handkerchief, a coin or piece of paper covered with some phosphorescent preparation were sufficient. The main part of her technique was surreptitiously freeing her hands and feet.

[Hodgson, 1895–96, p. 132]

Her [Eusapia's] tricks were usually childish: long hairs attached to small objects in order to produce 'telekinetic movements'; the gradual substitution of one hand for two when being controlled by sitters; the production of 'phenomena' with a foot which had been surreptitiously removed from its shoe, and so on.

[Price, 1939, p. 190]

Now there is a time-honoured device, exposed in the seventies by Moncure Conway, and afterwards by Maskelyne and others, by which mediums at dark séances succeed in freeing themselves from the control of the sitter. It may be described briefly as the art of making one hand (or one foot) do duty for two.

[Podmore, 1963, p. 200, writing about Eusapia]

Other authors who explicitly mention Eusapia's tricks with her hands and

feet are Houdini (1924), Hansel (1980), Rawcliffe, (1959), Dingwall (1950/1962) and Richet (1923), among many others.

So, what is really new in P & R's article? This question is all the more important to answer because *the authors do not produce any new facts, documents or any other data to sustain their interpretation of fraud.*

What are surely 'new' are two things. First, the arrogance in their rhetoric is nearly unmatched. They constantly present Feilding, Baggally and Carrington as highly incompetent investigators. The Feilding Report is presented as "badly flawed" (p.242); "the three investigators were simply no match for Eusapia" (p.242); "... it was the medium who controlled the experimenters" (p.248); "not one of the experimenters ever suspected that the phenomena might be produced by a foot" (p.251); "the gullibility of her experimenters was enough" (p.255).

That characterization of the three investigators at Naples is surely unmatched in the literature, because even sceptics who have criticized the Naples report recognize that the authors were experts in unmasking mediums. For example, Dingwall (1963) had this to say of the report: "From any point of view the report was one of the most masterly inquiries ever undertaken and the success of the series and the general arrangement were, in a very considerable measure indeed, due to the patience, competence and genius of Everard Feilding" (p.xiii). In a previous paper, Dingwall (1950/1962, pp.201-202) elaborated on this theme in detail:-

I was intimately acquainted with all three investigators. Mr. Carrington was one of the keenest investigators in the United States. He had unrivalled opportunities to examine the host of frauds and fakers who flourished there, and his results had led him to suppose that of the alleged physical phenomena the vast bulk was certainly produced by fraudulent means and devices, as he himself asserts in his book above mentioned. Mr. Feilding also was a man of vast experience and one of the keenest and most acute critics that this country has ever produced. He possessed a unique charm, and his sense of humour invariably saved him from the excesses into which others fell when they had become convinced. . . . He would go anywhere and see anything, treating everyone alike. . . . Moreover, his scepticism was extreme, although it was modified by an attitude of open-mindedness and an unwillingness to accept critical comments when these were unaccompanied by properly adduced evidence. Mr Baggally almost equalled Mr. Feilding in his scepticism and desire for investigation. He knew more about tricks methods than his illustrious colleague and thus he was better able to concentrate upon essentials. For over thirty years he had attended séances, but had come to the conclusion that rarely if ever had he encountered one genuine physical medium. This, then, was the committee that Eusapia consented to face.

Even Houdini (1924) said this about Baggally and Carrington. Of Baggally he said: "Mr. Baggally had a reputation as a conjuror and I think he has done much in the way of exposing mediums" (p.52). To Carrington he wrote the following: "At the same time I would like to inform you that I have read your book "The Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism"; also your articles in the monthly magazines. Your book is certainly THE BEST EVER WRITTEN ON THE SUBJECT,- at least that I have ever seen and read,- and I have the finest clippings in the world". (Carrington, 1957, p.82, Houdini's emphasis).

Even more striking is the fact that when Feilding, two years later, had a new series of séances in Naples with Eusapia, what he and others observed

were fraudulent manoeuvres on her part. In fact, Feilding and Baggally stress the point that "the conditions of control . . . were wholly different from those permitted" in the 1908 series at Naples. I quote:—

The medium evaded throughout any effective control, frequently making it impossible for the sitter on her left side to prevent her from releasing her left hand or foot, and took advantage of this to make constant use of them, as well as her elbow, for the production of spurious phenomena. [Feilding & Marriott, 1911, p. 58]

The results of the 1910 Naples sittings run counter to P & R's thesis that Feilding and collaborators were incompetent and "no match" for Eusapia. In point of fact, Feilding describes in his report the constant use of her feet and hands producing spurious phenomena.

Historically speaking, P & R's characterization of the Naples investigators is a fallacious caricature of their expertise and of the way that they approached the investigation of Eusapia. Their historical exposition is highly rhetorical and extremely dubious to those scholars who are well-versed in the history of psychical research. Their thesis that the Naples investigators were incompetent is, at its best, gratuitous; and at worst, highly misleading.

The second new thing about Polidoro's and Rinaldi's article is the highly improbable characterization of Eusapia's left foot. "It is with it, even during these séances, that she accomplished her best demonstrations" (p. 249). According to them: "Eusapia was, by then, 54 and was quite heavy: she did not look at all like a contortionist. Thus, it never dawned on the experimenters, as it appears many times from the Report, that Eusapia could have a hip so articulated to allow her such movements while she was sitting with her bust still. . . . That Eusapia's secret weapon was the articulated hip is not something which we are conjecturing about, it is a proven fact" (p. 250).

So, they contend that Eusapia's articulated hip and left foot (aided by the well-known method of substitution of hands) is all that we need to explain the 470 phenomena detailed in the Naples report, including: movements and complete levitation of the table; raps; strong and violent movements of the curtains; touches by unseen fingers; movements of objects inside the cabinet; appearance of a head from the cabinet; levitation of a small table outside the cabinet; appearance of white objects and hands; production of cold breeze; bulging of medium's dress, grasps by complete hand through curtain; loud bangs on the table; appearance of hand bringing bell from cabinet; appearance of lights; untying of knots; slow climbing of a stool up the curtain; and so on.

P & R's thesis of the sapient foot is not new in the sense that all previous investigators knew that under lax conditions Eusapia could free her foot and produce touches and movements of the table and curtains (see Feilding & Marriott, 1911, for examples). But what is surely new is the extraordinary and nearly superhuman ability that those authors assign to it. An ability that they rhetorically construct as a proven fact, when it is simply a conjecture, and a weak one indeed.

When all is said and done, I conclude that there are basically only two things new in P & R's article: their unconvincing rhetoric that the Naples investigators were incompetent; and their contention that Eusapia at the age of 54 was an extraordinary contortionist. This said, let us critically examine their main data and theses.

THE QUALITY AND CREDIBILITY OF POLIDORO AND RINALDI'S DATA

In this section I will review the data and rhetoric that the authors present to the reader to make credible their points.

Their thesis is: *Eusapia had an articulated hip and was a contortionist.*

This premise is the heart of P & R's thesis. Without it, Eusapia's "sapient foot" is merely another one of the many unsupported speculations given to explain Eusapia's physical mediumship (such as collective hallucinations; a third congenital arm; fraud on the part of her investigators, and so on). But, one might ask, what is the evidence for such a conjecture?

In the first place, they produce "a curious forgotten episode" as evidence in favour of it. The so-called episode consists of the ostensible communications from the spirits of Gurney and of Myers, through the medium Mrs Holland, in which it was claimed that Eusapia used her foot in a fraudulent manner. This "evidence" is beneath consideration, because of the improbability that Gurney and Myers were, in the afterworld, doing their own investigation of Eusapia and interested in unmasking her!

Secondly, P & R quote from secondary sources (Houdini, 1924; Hansel, 1989) an interesting incident narrated by Hugo Munsterberg (1910) of a séance which took place on December 18th, 1909, at which Munsterberg said that "a man" was lying flat on the floor and had succeeded in slipping himself below the curtain into the cabinet. From that position he supposedly saw that Eusapia had freed her foot from her shoe and with her leg was reaching out with her toes for the cabinet. At that point the man caught her heel with his hand, and Eusapia responded with a wild scream.

This incident, so crucially important according to P & R, must also be critically assessed. For example: who was that man? The only thing that we know is that many years later Houdini (1924) identifies him as E. Scott from Philadelphia. Was he reliable as an observer or reporter? Why did that man never publish an account (detailed or otherwise) of the sitting?

Overall, we are left with the highly unsatisfactory situation that the incident that P & R contend is so crucially important is based on (a) a purely anecdotal report, (b) published in a popular magazine (*Metropolitan Magazine*), (c) from Munsterberg's memories ("I remember before she was to reach far out from the table") of what a mysterious Mr Scott told him about an incident two months previous to his writing the journalistic account (February 1910), (d) by a psychologist with no knowledge of Eusapia's history or of how to investigate a physical medium,¹ (e) the report doesn't even mention who was the person who controlled Eusapia's body nor his expertise in controlling a physical phenomena medium; (f) and the crucial testimony of the man who crawled under the floor is missing! I sincerely wonder if P & R would have bothered to quote at length the testimony of Munsterberg if he had written positively on Eusapia in a popular magazine and in a purely anecdotal way. Probably not, I guess.

¹ Even Dingwall (1950/1962) makes some sarcastic comments on Munsterberg's competence as a psychical investigator: "Professor Hugo Munsterberg, the Harvard psychologist, had been invited, although why Mr. Carrington wasted a seat on one who was entirely unfit for such an inquiry it is difficult to say, unless he was at a loss to discover anyone who was so fitted" (p.211).

Interestingly, P & R do not consult the testimony of Hereward Carrington (1954), who was at that séance and who contributed some interesting comments. In Carrington's book (1954) we can read minute by minute the whole protocol of the session in question. The record shows that at 11:44 "E. screams sharply. Eusapia claimed that she uttered this cry for the reason that a human hand had grasped her left ankle, pulled it sideways and thrown it out, away from her" (p.113). It was two months later that Munsterberg stated, in a popular magazine, that a "man" had seized Eusapia's foot as she attempted to thrust it back into the cabinet. On this claim Carrington commented (pp.116-117):-

Nothing was said of this at the time, and all sitters denied having done anything of the sort. Even if it was true that Eusapia had done so, it would of course merely prove that she had attempted fraud on this particular occasion. But there is, I think, no evidence whatever that such was the case—far less that Eusapia had slipped her foot out of her shoe, as asserted, since she was wearing high boots at the time. . . . Eusapia's legs were short and plump, and she was suffering at the time from uremic poisoning, which ultimately caused her death. Her feet and ankles were often swollen and tender, as I myself verified.

I think that the fairest conclusion about Munsterberg's anecdotal report is that it offers no compelling and convincing evidence to sustain P & R's thesis that Eusapia produced her phenomena in the USA mostly by an ostensibly extraordinary acrobatic hip and leg. At most, the evidence is unclear, purely anecdotal and very imprecise.

The third and final type of evidence that P & R marshal in favour of their thesis is that supplied by the report of four magicians (Davis, Kellogg, Sargent & Rinn), who attended only two séances (April 17th & 24th, 1910) with Eusapia in the USA. In the séance of April 17th two persons (Rinn and Pyne) hid under the séance table where they could observe Eusapia's feet. In this particular séance the magicians loosened their control over Eusapia, and, as quoted by Hansel (1980), "she was left free to do as she pleased". In those totally lax conditions Eusapia freed her leg and proceeded to create some levitations of the table, kicked the curtain of the cabinet and moved a table in the cabinet.

Although P & R consider this type of evidence to be a death-blow to the Naples sittings, at this point a number of grave doubts arise. First, what is the similarity between the rigorous Naples investigation and a report in which the authors expressly stated that the medium was left free to do as she pleased? Precisely, nothing!² So, P & R do not have a shred of evidence to sustain their point that under tightly controlled conditions she could produce the phenomena recorded at Naples by fraudulent means. The conditions and purposes of these two séances were so different that any proposal of similarity is purely fallacious.

Secondly, the testimony that P & R quote originates from a popular magazine article (*Collier's Weekly*) written by a sceptical psychologist (Jastrow, 1910), who was not himself a witness of Eusapia's loose foot, and who quotes at

² Once again, Dingwall (1950/1962) offers some thoughtful comments: "If the accounts of these observers can be believed (and I have no evidence one way or the other by which this can be judged), the sittings were conducted in such a way that Eusapia was allowed repeatedly to evade both hand and foot control and all the 'phenomena' could be easily explained by the fraudulent methods so well known for so many years." (p. 213).

second hand the anecdotal report of Rinn. In fact, we don't have the slightest idea of how many months passed between Rinn's session and his anecdotal recollection of it. Also troubling is the fact that Houdini (1924) quotes at length from a report of the séances that Davis offered to him. Nowhere in the report is it mentioned that Eusapia moved her feet inside the cabinet. A truly amazing omission!

What is one to conclude of P & R's data to sustain their thesis? It seems clear that: (1) their evidence is based mostly on two anecdotal reports published in popular magazines; (2) crucial testimony is absent (the man from the Munsterberg account); (3) the conditions under which Eusapia freed her foot are either unknown (Munsterberg) or lax on purpose (Rinn).

Based on those highly imprecise data, are P & R on solid ground when they ask the reader to consider those anecdotal and imprecise data as sufficient to discard the Naples sittings? My answer is a clear no. In fact, my deep impression is that P & R's article is merely a rehash of old and well-known anecdotal data, to which they have added an unsound and unconvincing rhetoric with the transparent intention of forcefully proving that the Naples investigators were "incompetent", and a mix of unsupported speculations about Eusapia's abilities as extraordinary contortionist. My analysis shows that, as one critically examines their data, P & R's arguments are, one by one, reduced to ashes, leaving the impression that the scholarship of these two authors is seriously flawed.

OTHER MISCELLANEOUS CONSIDERATIONS

In this article I will not concentrate my efforts to disprove P & R's contention that in the Naples report "it was not the experimenters who were controlling the medium; but rather, it was the medium who controlled the experimenters" (p.248). If that statement is true, then it would be a complete mystery as to why the Naples report has been considered, for decades, to be one of the most sophisticated investigations in the annals of physical mediumship "and a stumbling-block for sceptics" (Beloff, 1993, p.120). But the major objection to P & R's sceptical assertions arises from a detailed reading of the Feilding Report itself, and not from the miscellaneous sentences that P & R quote. In fact, speaking about the conduct of the séances, Feilding, Baggally and Carrington comment (1909/1963, pp.33-34):-

The degree of control permitted by her varied very much, and appeared to depend upon her mood. If she was in a good temper she would generally allow us to control her as we pleased, that, is, to hold the whole of her hand, to tie her hands and her feet, or to encircle her feet with ours. If, as happened on two occasions, she was in a bad temper, she made difficulties about everything, complained of our suspicious attitude, allowed the poorest light, and was generally intractable. *We never found, however, that the adequacy of the control influenced unfavourably the production of the phenomena.* On the contrary, it was on the nights when she was in the best humour, and consequently when our precautions were the most complete and the light the strongest, that the phenomena were the most numerous. On the other hand, when she seemed in bad health, or was in a bad humour or indisposed for the séance, she appeared to try to evade our control: she would not allow us to grasp her hands fully, but merely rested them on ours; she asked for the light to be reduced, and her movements were furtive and hard to follow. The phenomena on these occasions were

rarer and of small account, *and we did not find that the reduction of light, and the consequent increased facility for fraud had any effect in stimulating them.*

DISCUSSION

In this paper my emphasis has been placed on two specific criticisms of P & R's critique of the Feilding Report. In the first place, I have shown that P & R's main thesis basically does not contain anything new. There are no new documents or data to sustain their claims: they simply present a conglomeration of rehashed information. Maybe 'new' (if that is the correct word) is their unsubstantiated claim that at 54 years, a small and rather plump woman³ had a wondrous and extraordinary left foot which produced most of the 470 striking physical phenomena, in front of a highly competent committee, who, in Dingwall's (1963) words, "set a new standard for this kind of reporting" (p. xiii).

My second emphasis has been on the inability of P & R's data to sustain their thesis of the "sapient foot". Those "data" are two miscellaneous, anecdotal and journalistic reports, each with a lot of loopholes, and the most important of them (Munsterberg, 1910) narrated at second hand in a very imprecise way. Further, the testimony of the supposedly only witness is missing from the journalistic tale.

P & R's paper is a classic piece of extreme sceptical writing. Their use of innuendoes, selective reporting, weak and flimsy accusations, magnification of any type of data that seems supportive (journalistic accounts and even Gurney's and Myers's 'investigation' of Eusapia in the afterworld!) and the minimization of all types of data that contradict their thesis, are well-known tactics frequently used by extreme believers or extreme sceptics. P & R exhibit the well-known confirmatory bias, which is so prevalent in the discussion of the paranormal (Marks & Kammann, 1980) and in the field of psychology (Snyder & Thorntsen, 1988).

All in all, I strongly suspect that P & R's sceptical rendition of the Feilding Report will not impact on those scholars who have a considerable knowledge of the history of psychical research. On the other hand, I don't doubt for a minute that the Feilding Report will continue to inspire sceptics or critical readers to disentangle what happened at those extraordinary eleven sittings. One only hopes that future efforts will be based on more than mere unsupported speculations or extravagant and unlikely scenarios.

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³ Richet (1923), and many others, described her as follows: "She was rather below the usual stature, plump, and had very small hands" (p. 412).

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